



Greening Liberalism

by Professor Marcel Wissenburg

Until the 1970s, environmental problems were rarely characterized as environmental and rarely recognized as political. It is no miracle then that liberalism, like other humanist political theories, is still learning to assimilate the environment and environmentalist critique in its conceptual universe

So how green can liberalism be? I tried to answer this question in my *Green Liberalism* (London, Routledge 1998) by pushing both liberalism and political ecology to their limits. One may expect a redistributive, perfectionist social liberal to find some common ground with moderate environmentalists, but how about classical liberals, libertarians or even neo-liberals, and what about tree-hugging holistic ecologists?

Political theories describe who should get what, when and how, and add reasons, a 'why', to accept them. Surprisingly, on each of these five dimensions even classical liberalism can be quite green. Very few green ideas turn out to be truly incompatible with core liberal convictions.

Who?

Ecologists have accused mainstream political theories, liberalism foremost, of turning not one but two blind eyes towards nature. Not only would liberalism be an anthropocentric doctrine, i.e., fail to consider the moral standing of non-human nature, it would also

support a very shallow understanding of human interests.

The alternative advocated by the 'darkest' greens, ecocentrism, requires recognition of the intrinsic value of nature - but unfortunately, that alternative fails to convince, among others because in many cases 'recognizing intrinsic value' simply means 'nature should mean more to us than money'. Few liberals will deny that.

Then again, the critique of anthropocentrism forces liberals to reconsider why we find ourselves so outrageously morally significant but care little about bugs. A careful analysis of relevant arguments reveals that liberalism is inconsistent here - certain animals, for instance, satisfy many of the necessary conditions for moral significance and none that exclude them.

That does not make them, let alone plants, as important as humans (blood is thicker than chlorophyll), but it does make them more worthy than dirt. So who is benefited or harmed by environmental policies? At the

very least not just humans.

What?

Of course environmental problems would not exist in a world of infinite resources. Can liberals regulate the use and abuse of natural resources without betraying its belief in individual property and individual choice?

The answer is already given by use of the term 'property'. The rights associated with property are more extensive than those attached to holdings or possessions; they include rights to appropriate or transfer a good, to determine its use and even to destroy it.

But no right is absolute. Your right to throw a brick and thereby break it is limited and perhaps even voided by my right to an unbroken skull. Each and every distinctive right to each and every distinctive action should at least in principle be justifiable by morally and logically sound reasons. Now even on classical liberal understanding of property rights like John Locke's, nothing can justify theft, i.e., taking what isn't yours, except dire

need - and even then compensation is due.

That lead me to formulate the Restraint Principle for the attribution of rights to natural resources, which roughly demands that no goods should be taken from nature unless it is to satisfy needs rather than wants, and unless it is replaced by an in all respects similar or equivalent good. Even classical liberalism can, then, accept 'limits to growth' and environmentally inspired limits to property use.

When?

Under this heading, a very special class of philosophical questions are grouped: those relating to future generations. One of the emotionally strongest arguments in favour of environmental concerns is the effect of our actions on the lives and welfare of our children or grandchildren - global warming, for instance, was discussed in these terms twenty years ago, showing that a strong argument does.

not necessarily have to be effective. One problem with future generations, however, is that they do not yet exist. In fact, no particular future individual X will ever exist unless parents and society conspire to create X at the exact right moment under the exact right circumstances.

So can X blame us for, say, exterminating the rhino if without the rhino going extinct, X would not even exist? How can X be worse off by existing rather than not existing, how can those two even be compared? In other words: if we cannot harm future generations, why bother doing anything for them?

There are ways around this quite perverse dilemma - but those that are compatible with liberal assumptions create another problem: somehow, individual parents are then made responsible for the choice to procreate, for any consequences in terms of lives not worth living for their offspring, and for any negative impact on the available resources for already existing

humans who chose not to procreate. And that may be too much of a responsibility for anyone to cope with. It is not as if liberals can find a satisfactory answer here that others, including ecologists, cannot. The discussion does however show that liberals can address green ideas as seriously as ecologists themselves should.

How?

We may assume that liberals can and occasionally even should be far greener than they are, both by taking more interests on board than short-term human greed alone and by reasserting the originally ecologically sound Lockean limits to property rights. We may also assume - for reasons I explained in my book - that liberals will acknowledge that technological 'supply-side' solutions can only postpone, not solve, environmental problems; the crucial factor in controlling and balancing the ecology is demand: population size and individual consumption. Even here, a classical liberal government can find room to do more than sit back and watch a Malthusian disaster developing; there are legitimate ways to promote a fair consideration of environmentally more benign desires and preferences in the private sphere. Liberalism, even in its classical gown, can create a sustainable society. What it cannot do is promote, let alone impose, one particular ideal of the sustainable society at the expense of others. Depending on how well free, intelligent and adult individuals can learn to critically reconsider and control their desires, the liberal sustainable society can be anything in between a global Yellowstone Park and a global Manhattan, fed on sea weed and algae.

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